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Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
The Year of Magical Thinking

Author: Joan Didion

Born December 5, 1934, in Sacramento, CA; daughter of Frank Reese and Eduene (Jerrett) Didion; married John Gregory Dunne (a writer), January 30, 1964 (deceased, 2003); children: Quintana Roo (daughter; deceased, 2005). Education: University of California, Berkeley, B.A., 1956. Addresses: Agent: Lynn Nesbit, Janklow & Nesbit, 445 Park Ave., 13th Fl., New York, NY 10022.

Name: Joan Didion
Born: December 5, 1934
Education: University of California, Berkeley, B.A.
Agent: Lynn Nesbit, Janklow & Nesbit, 445 Park Ave., 13th Fl., New York, NY 10022.

Career:

Writer. *Vogue*, New York, NY, 1956-63, began as promotional copywriter, became associate feature editor. Visiting regents lecturer in English, University of California—Berkeley, 1976

Awards:

First prize, *Vogue's* Prix de Paris, 1956; Bread Loaf fellowship in fiction, 1963; National Book Award nomination in fiction, 1971, for *Play It As It Lays*; Morton Dauwen Zabel Award, National Institute of Arts and Letters, 1978; National Book Critics Circle Prize nomination in nonfiction, 1980, and American Book Award nomination in nonfiction, 1981, both for *The White Album; Los Angeles Times* Book Prize nomination in fiction, 1984, for *Democracy*; Edward MacDowell Medal, 1996; Gold Medal for Belles Lettres, American Academy of Arts and Letters, in honor of distinguished writing career; National Book Award for nonfiction, National Book Foundation, 2005, for *The Year of Magical Thinking.*

Writings: Novels

Run River, Obolensky (New York, NY), 1963.
Play It As It Lays (also see below), Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1970, revised edition with introduction by David Thomson, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 2005.
A Book of Common Prayer, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1977.
Democracy, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1984.
The Last Thing He Wanted, Knopf (New York, NY), 1996.

Screenplays: With Husband, John Gregory Dunne:

Panic in Needle Park (based on James Mills's book of the same title), Twentieth Century-Fox, 1971.
Play It As It Lays (based on Didion's book of the same title), Universal, 1972.
(With others) *A Star Is Born*, Warner Bros., 1976.
True Confessions (based on John Gregory Dunne's novel of the same title), United Artists, 1981.
Hills Like White Elephants (based on Ernest Hemingway's short story), HBO, 1990.
Broken Trust (based on the novel *Court of Honor* by William Wood), TNT, 1995.
Up Close and Personal, Touchstone, 1996.

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Writings: Nonfiction

Slouching toward Bethlehem, Farrar, Straus (New York, NY), 1968.
The White Album, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1979.
Salvador, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1983.
Joan Didion: Essays & Conversations, Ontario Review Press (Princeton, NJ), 1984.
Miami, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1987.
Robert Graham: The Duke Ellington Memorial in Progress, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, CA), 1988.
After Henry, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1992, published in England as *Sentimental Journeys*, HarperCollins (London, England), 1993.
Political Fictions, Knopf (New York, NY), 2001.
Where I Was From, Knopf (New York, NY), 2003.
Fixed Ideas: America since 9.11, *New York Review of Books* (New York, NY), 2003.
Vintage Didion, Vintage Books (New York, NY), 2004.
The Year of Magical Thinking, Knopf (New York, NY), 2005.
Author of introduction, Robert Mapplethorpe, *Some Women*, Bulfinch Press (Boston, MA), 1992. Author of column, with John Gregory Dunne, "Points West," *Saturday Evening Post*, 1967-69, and "The Coast," *Esquire*, 1976-77; former columnist, *Life*. Contributor of short stories, articles, and reviews to periodicals, including *Vogue, Saturday Evening Post, Holiday, Harper's Bazaar*, and *New York Times Book Review, New Yorker*, and *New York Review of Books*. Former contributing editor, *National Review.*

Sidelights:

Throughout her long literary career, Joan Didion has distinguished herself with her highly polished style, her keen intelligence, and her provocative social commentary. Although her work frequently criticizes trends in the contemporary world, which she sees as increasingly chaotic, "her moral courage and tenacious search for truth deeply honor American values. No literary journalist currently writing is better able to shape the shards of American disorder into a living history of this time," commended Paul Ashdown in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. The author of novels, essays, and screenplays, Didion has always identified herself as being more interested in images than in ideas, and she is noted for her use of telling details. In addition to being "a gifted reporter," according to *New York Times Magazine* contributor Michiko Kakutani, Didion "is also a prescient witness, finding in her own experiences parallels of the times. The voice is always precise, the tone unsentimental, the view unabashedly subjective. She takes things personally." Didion has written a great deal about her native state, California, a place which seemed to supply her with ample evidence of the disorder in society. Her theme has remained essentially unchanged, but as the years have passed she has found new ways to express it, writing about troubles of Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the American political scene.

After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley in 1956, Didion took a job at *Vogue* magazine's New York office, where she remained for eight years, rising from promotional copywriter to associate feature editor. During this period, she met John Gregory Dunne and, after several years of friendship, they married, becoming not just matrimonial partners but writing collaborators as well. While still at *Vogue*, Didion began her first novel, *Run River*, which was published in 1963. The story concerns two families prominent in the Sacramento Valley, the Knights and the McClellans. Everett and Lily are children of these two prosperous families who elope. Before long they have two children, but their marriage slides into danger when Everett must leave home to serve in the armed forces during World War II. In his absence, Lily has an affair, which leads to her pregnancy. Everett returns and convinces Lily to abort the child, but their marriage can never recover; they live out their lives engaged in mutual recrimination, eventually ending in violence. "The novel depicts the social fragmentation of California that results from the dashed dreams of people drawn to the state by its promise of prosperity," mused Mark Royden in another *Dictonary of Literary Biography* essay. "What is finally ennobling about Lily's western experience, Didion seems to be saying, is not the dream that gave it birth, but the life force that enables her to survive the failure of that dream."

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In 1964, Didion and Dunne moved back to the West Coast, where she was determined to earn a living as a freelance reporter. Working on a series of magazine columns about California for the *Saturday Evening Post*, the couple earned a meager $7,000 in their first year. But their writing did attract widespread attention, and when Didion's columns were collected and published in 1968 as *Slouching toward Bethlehem*, her reputation as an essayist soared. The collection takes its theme from William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming," which reads: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." For Didion those words sum up the chaos of the 1960s, a chaos so far-reaching that it affected her ability to perform. Convinced "that writing was an irrelevant act, that the world as I had understood it no longer existed," Didion, as she states in the book's preface, realized, "If I was to work again at all, it would be necessary for me to come to terms with disorder." She went to Haight-Ashbury to explore the hippie movement and out of that experience came the title essay. Most critics reserved high praise for *Slouching toward Bethlehem*. Writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Melvin Maddocks suggested that Didion's "melancholy voice is that of a last survivor dictating a superbly written wreckage report onto a tape she doubts will ever be played." And while *Best Sellers* reviewer T. O'Hara argued that "the devotion she gives to America-the-uprooted-the-lunatic-and-the-alienated is sullied by an inability to modulate, to achieve a respectable distance," most critics applauded her subjectivity. "Nobody captured the slack-jawed Haight-Ashbury hippies any better," acknowledged *Saturday Review* contributor Martin Kasindorf.

In 1970 Didion published *Play It As It Lays*, a best-selling novel that received a National Book Award nomination and, at the same time, created enormous controversy with its apparently nihilistic theme. The portrait of a woman on what *New York Times Book Review* contributor Lore Segal called a "downward path to wisdom," *Play It As It Lays* tells the story of Maria Wyeth's struggle to find meaning in a meaningless world. "The setting is the desert; the cast, the careless hedonists of Hollywood; the emotional climate, bleak as the surroundings," Kakutani reported in the *New York Times Magazine*. Composed of eighty-four brief chapters, some less than a page in length, the book possesses a cinematic quality and such technical precision that Richard Shickel remarked in *Harper's* that it is "a rather cold and calculated fiction—more a problem in human geometry...than a novel that truly lives."

A Book of Common Prayer continues the author's theme of social disintegration with the story of Charlotte Douglas, a Californian "immaculate of history, innocent of politics." Until her daughter Marin abandoned home and family to join a group of terrorists, Charlotte was one who "understood that something was always going on in the world but believed that it would turn out all right." When things fall apart, Charlotte takes refuge in Boca Grande, a fictitious Central American country embroiled in its own domestic conflicts. There she idles away her days at the airport coffee shop, futilely waiting for her daughter to surface and eventually losing her life in a military coup.

Because Charlotte's story is narrated by Grace, an American expatriate and long-time Boca Grande resident, the book presented several technical problems. "The narrator was not present during most of the events she's telling you about. And her only source is a woman incapable of seeing the truth," Didion explained to Diehl. In her *New York Times Book Review* article, Joyce Carol Oates speculated that Didion employs this technique because Grace permits Didion "a free play of her own speculative intelligence that would have been impossible had the story been told by Charlotte. The device of an uninvolved narrator is a tricky one, since a number of private details must be presented as if they were within the range of the narrator's experience. But it is a measure of Didion's skill as a novelist that one never questions [Grace's] near omniscience in recalling Charlotte's story." Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, on the other hand, maintained in the *New York Times* that Didion "simply asks too much of

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Charlotte, and overburdened as she is by the pitiless cruelty of the narrator's vision, she collapses under the strain."

After *A Book of Common Prayer*, Didion published *The White Album*, a second collection of magazine essays similar in tone to *Slouching towards Bethlehem*. "I don't have as many answers as I did when I wrote *Slouching*," Didion explained to Kakutani. She called the book *The White Album* in consideration of a famous Beatles album that captured for her the disturbing ambiance of the sixties. "I am talking here about a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself," Didion writes in the title essay. "This period began around 1966 and continued until 1971." During this time, says Didion, "all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no 'meaning' beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cuttingroom experience."

Salvador stands as one of Didion's most successful reportorial works. Originally published as two articles in the *New York Review of Books*, it was also nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. The piece was based on a two-week visit Didion and Dunne made to the embattled Republic of El Salvador in June, 1982. A repressive military regime had taken hold there and horrific violence was a daily occurrence. Like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness, Salvador* "contemplates the meaning of existence when one confronts absolute evil," stated Ashman. "Taken only as a short, impressionistic report on the war, *Salvador* would be a slight work. Something much more is intended, however, than telling the facts about El Salvador. Like Conrad's tale, *Salvador* is a journey into the interior of the human soul." Although highly acclaimed for its literary merits, Salvador did generate criticism as well as praise. *Newsweek* reviewer Gene Lyon, for example, allowed that "Didion gets exactly right both the ghastliness and the pointlessness of the current killing frenzy in El Salvador," but then suggested that "ghastliness and pointlessness are Didion's invariable themes wherever she goes. Most readers will not get very far in this very short book without wondering whether she visited that sad and tortured place less to report than to validate the Didion world view."

A year after *Salvador* was published, Didion produced *Democracy*. The book was to have been the story of a family of American colonialists whose interests were firmly entrenched in the Pacific at a time when Hawaii was still a territory, but Didion abandoned this idea. The resulting novel features Inez Christian and her family. In the spring of 1975—at the time the United States completed its evacuation of Vietnam and Cambodia—Inez's father is arrested for a double murder with political and racial overtones. "The Christians and their in-laws are the emblems of a misplaced confidence," according to John Lownsbrough in Toronto's *Globe and Mail*, "the flotsam and jetsam of a Manifest Destiny no longer so manifest. Their disintegration as a family in the spring of 1975 ... is paralleled by the fall of Saigon a bit later that year and the effective disintegration of the American expansionist dream in all its ethnocentric optimism." Somehow, her family's tragedy enables Inez to break free of her marriage to a self-serving politician and escape to Malaysia with Jack Lovett, a freelance CIA agent and the man she has always loved. Though he dies abruptly, Inez holds on to her freedom, choosing to remain in Kuala Lumpur where she works among the Vietnamese refugees.

New York Review of Books critic Thomas R. Edwards believed *Democracy* "finally earns its complexity of form. It is indeed 'a hard story to tell' and the presence in it of 'Joan Didion' trying to tell it is an essential part of its subject. Throughout one senses the author struggling with the moral difficulty that makes the story hard to tell—how to stop claiming what Inez finally relinquishes, 'the American exemption' from having to recognize that history records not the victory of personal wills over reality ... but the 'undertow of having and not having, the convulsions of a world largely unaffected by the individual efforts of anyone in it.'"

Miami once again finds Didion on the literary high wire, in a work of nonfiction that focuses on the cultural, social, and political impact the influx of Cuban exiles has had upon the city of Miami and, indeed, upon the entire United States. Culminating in an indictment of American foreign policy from the presidential administrations of

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John F. Kennedy through Ronald Reagan, *Miami* "is a thoroughly researched and brilliantly written meditation on the consequences of power, especially on power's self-addictive delusions," according to *Voice Literary Supplement* reviewer Stacey D'Erasmo. The book explores the thirty-year history of the community of Cuban immigrants which now comprises over half the population of that city. Didion paints these émigrés as existing within a country that threatens their political agenda, and a city full of enemies. "The shadowy missions, the secret fundings, the conspiracies beneath conspiracies, the deniable support by parts of the U.S. government and active discouragement by other parts," Richard Eder wrote in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, paraphrasing Didion's argument, "all these things have fostered a tensely paranoid style in parts of our own political life .... Miami is us." While noting that Didion's intricate—if journalistic—style almost overwhelms her argument, Eder compared *Miami* to a luxury hunting expedition: "You may look out the window and see some casually outfitted huntsman trudging along. You may wonder whether his experience is more authentic than yours. Didion's tour is overarranged, but that is a genuine lion's carcass strapped to our fender."

After Henry, published in the United Kingdom as *Sentimental Journeys*, is a collection of twelve essays organized loosely around three geographical areas that Didion has focused on throughout her writing career: Washington, D.C., California, and New York City. "For her they are our Chapels Perilous," declared Robert Dana in the *Georgia Review*, "where power and dreams fuse or collide." The title essay is a tribute to Didion's friend and mentor Henry Robbins, who served as her editor prior to his death in 1979.

Politics are discussed in the section titled "Washington." The essay "In the Realm of the Fisher King" is an analysis of the years of the Reagan presidency. "Her difficulty with politics is that she really doesn't know it as well as she imagines," stated Jonathan Yardley in the *Washington Post Book World*, "and brings to it no especially useful insights." However, reviewer Hendrik Hertzberg lauded "Inside Baseball," Didion's essay on the 1988 presidential campaign, in the *New York Times Book Review*: "Her cool eye sees sharply when it surveys the rich texture of American public folly....What she has to say about the manipulation of images and the creation of pseudo-events makes familiar territory new again." But, Hertzberg added, Didion's "focus on the swirl of 'narratives' is useful as a way of exploring political image-mongering, but surprisingly limited as a way of describing the brute political and social realities against which candidates and ideas must in the end be measured."

Included among the remaining works in *After Henry* is "Sentimental Journeys," a three-part "attack on New York City and the sentimentality that distorts and obscures much of what is said and done there, and which has brought the city to the edge of bankruptcy and collapse," according to Dana. One section explores the way in which the highly publicized 1990 rape of a white investment banker jogging in New York City's Central Park—and the trial that followed—was transformed by the media into what Didion terms a "false narrative." Combined with her illuminating discussion of the many rapes occurring in the city that are not given such intensive press coverage and the decreasing competitive edge possessed by the city when viewed in real terms, "Didion's portrait is one of a city drugged nearly to death on the crack of its own myths," according to Dana, "its own 'sentimental stories told in defense of its own lazy criminality.'"

After a twelve-year hiatus, Didion returned to fiction with *The Last Thing He Wanted*. Set in 1984, the year *Democracy* was published, it contains some of the same elements, but this time in a different outpost of American foreign-policy gamesmanship, Central America. Told from the viewpoint of a "not quite omniscient" narrator, it is the story of Elena McMahon, a writer who walks away from a job covering the presidential campaign and returns to Florida and her widowed father. A shady wheeler-dealer fading into senility, her father sees a chance to turn a huge profit by supplying arms to Nicaragua's anticommunist *contras*, and Elena flies to Costa Rica to close the deal. Before long, she is caught in a web of gunrunners, CIA operatives, and a conspiracy that stretches from the JFK assassination to the Iran-Contra scandal. Some reviewers criticized the narrator, and by extension the novel, as too vague and unreal. "The problem of *The Last Thing He Wanted*, "

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according to *New Republic* critic James Wood, "is not that our author is 'not quite omniscient.' It is that our narrator is not quite a person." Michiko Kakutani, writing in the *New York Times*, found the novel equally unconvincing: "Despite Ms. Didion's nimble orchestration of emotional and physical details, despite her insider's ear for lingo, her conspiratorial view of history never feels terribly persuasive .... In the end, what's meant to be existential angst feels more like self-delusion; what's meant to be disturbing feels more like paranoia." Other critics, however, found this "unreality" oddly appropriate. For example, John Weir wrote in the *New Yorker*: "A dream is disorienting but it adheres to its own particular logic. By contrast, the real life events on which novels are traditionally based have lately taken on a quality that almost defies their being retold. 'This is something different,' Didion's narrator writes about the story she's driven to tell. The result is entrancing—a dream without the logic of a dream, the way we live now."

Didion published another collection of her essays in 2001. *Political Fictions* is made up of pieces previously printed in the *New York Review of Books*. Her central theme is that political life in the United States has become increasingly inauthentic, designed for and shaped by the media, and controlled by a small elite class that shows complete disregard for the majority of the electorate. She is acerbic in her criticism of the media's part in this state of affairs, claiming that they are willing accomplices with the political powers that be. Her time frame begins with the rivalry between Michael Dukakis and George Bush, Sr., continues through the years of the Clinton administration and on to the bitter battle of the presidential campaign in 2000. Again and again she reaches the conclusion that democracy in modern America is "not a system of majority rule or an expression of voter choice; it is a cheap spectacle acted out by the craven officials and smug journalists of Washington's 'political class,'" explained Sean McCann in *Book*. McCann found some of the author's conclusions "questionable," but added that the "anger and beauty of Didion's work" is so great that "while one reads, it is hard not to nod one's head in assent." A *Publishers Weekly* writer stated that "at her best, Didion is provocative, persuasive and highly entertaining." Noting that Democrats, Republicans, and political reporters all come under fire from Didion, the writer added: "Didion's willingness to skewer nearly everyone is one of the pleasures of the book."

Didion published two books in 2003: *Where I Was From* and *Fixed Ideas: America Since 9.11*. The first returned to one of her favorite subjects, the state of California. She had actually started the book in the 1970s, but found it so difficult to write that she set it aside for many years. The death of her mother finally provided the impetus for her to finish it. Her aim was to explore the vast gap between the reality of California and the popular image of the state. Coming from a long line of Californians, Didion explored many family stories in the course of her narrative. The picture she paints of modern-day California is not flattering; she sees "greed, acquisitiveness and wasteful extravagance lurking beneath the state's eternal sunshine," wrote a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer. Even in its earlier days, now greatly romanticized, California was in fact a place where bigotry and other forms of inhumanity flourished. While many people might find her opinions debatable, "the book is a remarkable document precisely because of its power to trigger a national debate that can heighten awareness and improve conditions on the West Coast and throughout the country," concluded the reviewer. Terren Ilana Wein, a writer for *Library Journal*, defined *Where I Was From* as "a complex and challenging memoir, difficult to enter into but just as difficult to put down .... Those who have long admired the clarity and precision of her prose will not be disappointed with this partly autobiographical, partly historical, but fully engrossing account."

Didion critiqued the political aftermath of the September 11, 2001, destruction of the World Trade Center towers in her book *Fixed Ideas: America Since 9.11*. "In times of national crisis, the public turns to such proven, clear-eyed observers of American society to place events within a historical and political context," stated Donna Seaman in *Booklist*. She noted, however, that meaningful discussion as to the roots of the tragedy was difficult because those who tried to initiate it were "instantly branded as traitors" by the Bush administration. Didion dissects the administration's tactics and strategies for managing the public perception of the terrorist attacks and the war on Iraq that followed. Her analysis proves her to be a "shrewd, seasoned, and superbly

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articulate interpreter of the machinations of American politics, particularly the art of spin." The author was quoted by Chauncey Mabe, a contributor to the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, as saying: "My immediate thought after 9/11 was that it would alter everything .... But whatever did change doesn't seem to include the political process. I knew this as soon as President Bush made his first speech to the nation, and all the commentators were analyzing how it played, how it was an 'up thing' that took attention off the economy. That was pretty discouraging." Discouraged or not, Didion stands as a significant witness to the modern world. "Her prose is a literary seismograph," claimed Dana, "on which are clearly registered the tremors and temblors that increasingly shake the bedrock of the American social dream."

In 2005 Didion published *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a memoir of the year of her life following the death of her husband, writer John Gregory Dunne. The couple had returned home from visiting their only daughter, Quintana Roo, who was admitted to a hospital when a progressive flu developed into pneumonia and then sepsis, a severe bloodstream infection. That evening, Dunne died suddenly of a massive heart attack. "She gave away her husband's clothes but not his shoes; he would need them if he somehow returned to her. This, she says, was the beginning of her year of magical thinking," commented Linda Hall in *American Prospect*. Robert Pinsky, writing in *New York Times Book Review*, called the book an "exact, candid and penetrating account of personal terror and bereavement." Pinsky further noted, "Didion's book is thrilling and engaging—sometimes quite funny—because it ventures to tell the truth .... grief makes us crazy." Pinsky also commented on Didion's writing style, stating that her use of "repeated, vague, nearly meaningless phrases ... dramatize both the inner numbness of shock and the outer reality of the emergency, a terminal reality that is uniquely complicated and simple." Sadly, after the book was published, Quintana Roo died in August of 2005, although the end of the memoir suggested she may recover. Didion did not feel it was necessary to change the book to reflect the passing of her daughter. The same year, Didion was awarded the National Book Award for nonfiction for her moving story of personal loss.

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Writings by the Author:

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Periodicals:

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Booklist Reviews 2005 August #1
Starred Review Didion—a master essayist, great American novelist, and astute political observer—uses autobiography as a vehicle for tonic inquiries into both the self and society. In *Where I Was From* (2003), she meshed family history with an examination of America's romance with the West. Here, in her most personal and generous book to date, she chronicles a year of grief with her signature blend of intellectual rigor and deep feeling. The ordeal began on Christmas 2003 when Didion and her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, learn that their daughter, Quintana Roo, is in intensive care with severe pneumonia and septic shock. Five grim days later, Dunne and Didion come home from the hospital, sit down to dinner, and Dunne suffers "a sudden massive coronary event" and dies. Married for 40 years and sharing a passion for literature, they were inordinately close. But Didion could not give herself over to grief: Quintana's health went from bad to worse as she developed a life-threatening hematoma on her brain. She survived, and Didion had the wherewithal to cope: "In times of trouble, I had been trained since childhood, read, learn, work it up, go the literature. Information was control." So she researches grief, schools herself in her daughter's medical conditions, and monitors the flux of flashbacks and fears that strobe through her mind. Didion describes with compelling precision exactly how grief feels, and how it impairs rational thought and triggers "magical thinking." The result is a remarkably lucid and ennobling anatomy of grief, matched by a penetrating tribute to marriage, motherhood, and love. ((Reviewed August 2005)) Copyright 2005 *Booklist* Reviews.

BookPage Reviews 2005 October
Website: http://www.bookpage.com
Didion's year of grief
After 40 years of marriage, writer Joan Didion did not have a single letter from her husband, writer John Gregory Dunne. This was because, with rare exceptions, the pair was together 24 hours a day. They worked together in California hotel rooms on movie scripts or down the hall from one another in their New York apartment on their respective essays and novels. "I could not count the times during an average day when something would come up that I needed to tell him," Didion writes. Returning home alone from the hospital where she has learned Dunne is dead—he collapsed and died as the couple was sitting down to dinner on December 30, 2003—Didion remembers "thinking that I needed to discuss this with John."
The Year of Magical Thinking is Didion's slender, intensely personal, deeply moving and stylistically beautiful account of the year following her husband's death. It was a year in which Didion struggled with the belief that she could have and should have done something to prevent her husband's death ("I was thinking as small children think, as if my thoughts or wishes had the power to reverse the narrative, change the outcome."). It was a year in which she was constantly swept into a vortex of memories of the couple's former life. It was a year in which grief came in recursive, paralyzing waves. It was also a year in which the couple's only child, daughter Quintana Roo, was twice in a coma and not expected to live. [Tragically, Quintana died in late August, just weeks before Didion's book was published.]
At the hospital on the night Dunne died, the social worker sent to be with Didion refers to her as "a pretty cool customer." Didion is surely one of the best prose stylists writing today, and her account is almost clinically precise. She is unsparing in her examination of the "derangement" she experienced after her husband's death and during her daughter's illness ("So profound was the isolation in which I was then operating that it did not immediately occur to me that for the mother of a patient to show up at the hospital wearing blue cotton scrubs could only be viewed as a suspicious violation of boundaries."). But *The Year of Magical Thinking* is anything but "cool." Instead, the book reverberates with passion and even, occasionally, ironic humor. "Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it," Didion writes. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, she offers a powerful, personally revealing description of that place. Copyright 2005 *BookPage* Reviews.

Reviews:

LJ Reviews 2005 September #1
Website: http://www.cahners.com
In her latest work of nonfiction, essayist, novelist, journalist, and screenwriter Didion (*Slouching Towards Bethlehem*) chronicles the grief she suffered at her husband's passing. John Gregory Dunne's unexpected death of cardiac arrest in the winter of 2003 ended a marriage of nearly 40 years, and Didion examines her complicated responses to that loss, which included subtle forms of denial, illogical guilt, and a drive to get the facts of his passing absolutely straight. Her grieving process was interrupted and magnified by her daughter's concurrent struggle with a life-threatening illness. This book was started nine months after John's death and after their daughter's recovery, but before Didion was able to move past these traumatic events and continue with her own life. Consequently, the predominant atmosphere is one of authentic suspense that makes for a remarkable page-turner. As always, Didion's writing style is sheer and highly efficient. Strongly recommended for all libraries. —Maria Kochis, California State Univ., Sacramento

Kirkus Reviews 2005 July #2
A moving record of Didion's effort to survive the death of her husband and the near-fatal illness of her only daughter. In late December 2003, Didion (*Where I Was From*, 2003, etc.) saw her daughter, Quintana Roo Dunne, hospitalized with a severe case of pneumonia, the lingering effects of which would threaten the young woman's life for several months to come. As her daughter struggled in a New York ICU, Didion's husband, John Gregory Dunne, suffered a massive heart attack and died on the night of December 30, 2003. For 40 years, Didion and Dunne shared their lives and work in a marriage of remarkable intimacy and endurance. In the wake of Dunne's death, Didion found herself unable to accept her loss. By "magical thinking," Didion refers to the ruses of self-deception through which the bereaved seek to shield themselves from grief—being unwilling, for example, to donate a dead husband's clothes because of the tacit awareness that it would mean acknowledging his final departure. As a poignant and ultimately doomed effort to deny reality through fiction, that magical thinking has much in common with the delusions Didion has chronicled in her several previous collections of essays. But perhaps because it is a work of such intense personal emotion, this memoir lacks the mordant bite of her earlier work. In the classics *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (1968) and *The White Album* (1979), Didion linked her personal anxieties to her withering dissection of a misguided culture prey to its own self-gratifying fantasies. This latest work concentrates almost entirely on the author's personal suffering and confusion—even her husband and daughter make but fleeting appearances—without connecting them to the larger public delusions that have been her special terrain. A potent depiction of grief, but also a book lacking the originality and acerbic prose that distinguished Didion's earlier writing.First printing of 60,000

PW Reviews 2005 June #4
Website: http://www.cahners.com
Many will greet this taut, clear-eyed memoir of grief as a long-awaited return to the terrain of Didion's venerated, increasingly rare personal essays. The author of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and 11 other works chronicles the year following the death of her husband, fellow writer John Gregory Dunne, from a massive heart attack on December 30, 2003, while the couple's only daughter, Quintana, lay unconscious in a nearby hospital suffering from pneumonia and septic shock. Dunne and Didion had lived and worked side by side for nearly 40 years, and Dunne's death propelled Didion into a state she calls "magical thinking." "We might expect that we will be prostrate, inconsolable, crazy with loss," she writes. "We do not expect to be literally crazy, cool customers who

Reviews:

believe that their husband is about to return and need his shoes." Didion's mourning follows a traditional arc-she describes just how precisely it cleaves to the medical descriptions of grief-but her elegant rendition of its stages leads to hard-won insight, particularly into the aftereffects of marriage. "Marriage is not only time: it is also, paradoxically, the denial of time. For forty years I saw myself through John's eyes. I did not age." In a sense, all of Didion's fiction, with its themes of loss and bereavement, served as preparation for the writing of this memoir, and there is occasionally a curious hint of repetition, despite the immediacy and intimacy of the subject matter. Still, this is an indispensable addition to Didion's body of work and a lyrical, disciplined entry in the annals of mourning literature. Agent, Lynn Nesbit. 60,000 first printing; 11-city author tour. (Oct. 19)

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: The Year of Magical Thinking

Reading Guide from HarperCollins UK:

The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion

"From one of America's iconic writers, a stunning book of electric honesty and passion. Joan Didion explores an intensely personal yet universal experience: a portrait of a marriage–and a life, in good times and bad–that will speak to anyone who has ever loved a husband or wife or child."

Several days before Christmas 2003, John Gregory Dunne and Joan Didion saw their only daughter, Quintana, fall ill with what seemed at first flu, then pneumonia, then complete septic shock. She was put into an induced coma and placed on life support. Days later–the night before New Year's Eve–the Dunnes were just sitting down to dinner after visiting the hospital when John Gregory Dunne suffered a massive and fatal coronary. In a second, this close, symbiotic partnership of forty years was over. Four weeks later, their daughter pulled through. Two months after that, arriving at LAX, she collapsed and underwent six hours of brain surgery at UCLA Medical Center to relieve a massive hematoma.This powerful book is Didion's attempt to make sense of the ''*weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I ever had about death, about illness...about marriage and children and memory... about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself*.''

What they said:

'The book of the year…a heartbreaking, passionate book that offers no easy answers.' *Guardian*

'This is a beautiful and devastating book by one of the finest writers we have. Didion has always been a precise, humane and meticulously truthful writer, but on the subject of death she becomes essential.' Zadie Smith

'It is the most awesome performance of both participating in, and watching, an event. Even though Didion does not allow herself to break down, only a terribly controlled reader will resist doing the same.' *Independent*

'Ultimately, and unexpectedly for a book about illness and death, this is a wonderfully life affirming book.' *Observer*

'A masterpiece of restraint and perception...Utterly compelling.' *Sunday Times*

'Taking the reader to places where they would not otherwise go is one of the things a really good book can do. *The Year of Magical Thinking* does just that, and brilliantly. Powerful, moving and true.' *Spectator*

'Joan Didion has produced, with desperate honesty, a book about loss and grief...It is astonishing to find a great subject, in all its sorrow, meeting its match in one of the true talents of our age.' Colm Toibin

Starting Points:

Consider the four sentences in italics that begin chapter one. What did you think when you read them for the first time? What do you think now?

Discuss the notion of 'magical thinking.' Have you ever experienced anything like this, after a loss or some other life-changing occurrence? How did it help, or hinder, your healing?

Do you think Didion's 'year of magical thinking' ended after one year, or did it likely continue?

Book: The Year of Magical Thinking

Starting Points: (Continued)

Consider the tone Didion uses throughout the book, one of relatively cool detachment. Clearly she is in mourning, and yet her anguish is quite muted. How did this detached tone affect your reading experience?

How does Didion use humor? To express her grief, to deflect it, or for another purpose entirely?

To Didion, there is a clear distinction between grief and mourning. What differences do you see between the two?

Discuss Didion's repetition of sentences like "For once in your life just let it go"; "We call it the widowmaker"; "I tell you that I shall not live two days"; and "Life changes in the instant." What purpose does the repetition serve? How did your understanding of her grief change each time you reread one of these sentences?

The lifestyle described in this book is quite different from the way most people live, with glamorous friends, expensive homes, and trips to Hawaii, Paris, South America, etc., and yet none of that spared Didion from experiencing profound grief. Did her seemingly privileged life color your feelings about the book at all? Did that change after reading it?

At several points in the book Didion describes her need for knowledge, whether it's from reading medical journals or grilling the doctors at her daughter's bedside. How do you think this helped her to cope?

Is there a turning point in this book? If so, where would you place it and why?

Didion is adapting *The Year of Magical Thinking* into a play bound for Broadway. How do you imagine its transition from page to stage? Would you want to see the play?

Before *The Year of Magical Thinking*, had you ever read any of Joan Didion's work? Do you see any similar themes or motifs?

If you liked *The Year of Magical Thinking* you might also like:

Stuart: A Life Backwards by Alexander Masters
The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold
On Beauty by Zadie Smith
Saturday by Ian McEwan

About the Author:

Joan Didion was born in 1934 in Sacramento, California, and lives in New York City. She is the author of five novels and seven previous books of nonfiction.

Other books by Joan Didion:

Where I Was From
Political Fictions
The Last Thing He Wanted
After Henry
Miami
Democracy
Salvador
A Book of Common Prayer
Run River
The White Album